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Title: Sense and Absence: Politics of Nonsense in James Joyce's Later Works

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Synopsis

The world of nonsense is one where the authoritative codes of functions are inverted; it is characterized by paradoxes: making sense out of nonsense, creating a world of anarchy out of pattern as well as restoring an alternative form of order out of that chaos. Nonsense foregrounds the serious sense of marginality of human beings in this cosmic design and the pathos of meaninglessness of existence that is born out of the feelings of 'thrownness' from the point of origin to an alien universe. As a genre, it holds a satirical mirror to the rational ideas of life. Nonsense believes in inviolability of human predicament and an awareness of futility. I would like to investigate how nonsense as a tool becomes necessary for the aesthetic modernism that responds to the scenario of chaos—consequent of the destruction of civilization, faith and reason in the World Wars—and negotiates with the randomness of consciousness in the later works of James Joyce, primarily in *Finnegans Wake* (1939).

It is important that *Finnegans Wake, Sui generis*, is distinguished from Nonsense Literature *per se*. In my dissertation, disagreeing with Hana F. Khasawneh, who in her doctoral dissertation argues Joyce to be 'the happy prodigal' of the 'family' of Literary Nonsense, I would try to establish that nonsense in Joyce acts as a strategic ploy and has a critical interrogative function laying bare the contradictions that are at the root of meaning-making. Nonsense literature might bear adult meanings and cultural ramifications beneath the surface but it, at one level, caters to the naivety and innocence of the primary audience, the children (different from the audience of Joyce). The transparency in representation makes a deliberate authorial intention of making sense to her readers evident. After a few pages, it does not frustrate our expectations anymore; the horizon of expectation is broadened. It even conforms, more often than not, to the rules of prose or and those of poetry. On the contrary, Joyce's anarchic word-play and free-flow of speech conforms, if at all, not to the rules of prose or poetry but to that of Play. Here the indeterminacy of the plot should not be seen as a flaw, leading to the effect of nonsense and boredom, but as a paradigm shift that has taken place in the literary sensibilities of high-modernism giving way to the *noveau roman.*

Much ink has been spilled over the seemingly inscrutable language of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and the anarchic nature of *Ulysses*. Expanding on the linguistic and stylistic experimentations of his magnum opus *Ulysses,* Joyce composed the *Wake* almost exclusively in neologisms, resulting in the work being infamously perceived as difficult and meaningless. To tame the chaotic structures of *Wake*is equally reductive in scope as it is to measure the sudden leaps and frown at the jagged edges of such a narrative that is synchronically designed with its

emphasis on the fugal as opposed to the chronological form. This automatically forestalls the 'logic' of narrative, inviting the readers to experience through allusions, modes of repetitions, symbols, 'cadences of Irish life, scatological details, archetypal patterns, the cruel comicality of being fallen from the epic scales to the ordinariness of a paralyzed Dublin.'

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* it is evident that the nonsense functions as a subversive form of narrative, challenging the social hierarchies and deviating from the normative customs and conventions, and it does so by providing an alternative model of a universe, an Wonderland, whereas Joyce clearly transforms the 'futility and anarchy' into a narrative that is never consciously a 'nonsense prose fiction' but renders the nonsensicality only by representing in a way that seemed to Joyce the only possible way of representation that can register the 'nightmare of history', the colonial oppression and the consequent isolation of the modernist artist. The objective of this study is to see through the aesthetic principles and the underlying ideologies. Linguistic innovation and the mock-heroic, parodic stance that Joyce takes by indulging in language-games and pastiches can be seen as a political act of ridiculing the Irish standards he considered limiting to his creative impulses.

Language for Joyce is profoundly artificial and he seems to be never at home with his language since, one might argue, for Joyce, and as for Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and indeed for any Irishman, English was both familiar and foreign, an acquired speech. He needed to create a language in which his artistic freedom could be restored, even if that implied the compulsion to assimilate and accommodate the apparently nonsensical apparatus within his grand design. Nonsense in *Finnegans Wake,* therefore, can be seen as a consequence of Joyce's violation of propriety that beauty in art so strictly demands, thereby making it ugly and vulgar. Deeming perversion and deformity or lack not as pejorative qualities but as alternative possibilities – it 'asserts the resistance of fact to fiction, human freedom and unpredictability against plot', the thesis would also investigate how the aesthetics of nonsense deals with morality in art and would argue that the categories of 'sense' and 'nonsense' get dissolved in Joyce's 'utopian epiphanies'.

A close textual reading is favoured in my research which will be informed by Luca Crispi and Sam Slote's *How Joyce wrote Finnegans Wake,* a chapter-by-chapter genetic examination of Joyce's notebooks and of the evolution of the *Wake* through its many drafts and publications. My contention, sharing that of Fritz Senn, that the 'traditional summaries' are reductive, unsatisfactory and unhelpful, leads me to investigate as to why we do not 'understand' *Finnegans Wake*. By the time Joyce begins writing *Wake,* he has exhausted the English vocabulary and requires finding a different, if not new, tongue resulting in the polyglot performance that it eventually becomes. The dissertation would try to address a previous gap in Joyce criticism by investigating how nonsense is put to work in Joyce's final artistic venture, arguing that when the liminality of language confronts the sublime, the aesthetic response is bound to be disturbingly nonsensical. Joyce frustrates our expectations with his linguistic virtuosity and invites the readers with their sophisticated understanding of textuality to explore the mythopoeic world of *Wake*.

Impenetrable, obscure and dark, as it were, *Finnegans Wake* invites the 'ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia' to indulge in this Joycean carnivalesque, a 'prepronomial

funferal' (Joyce 1992, 120). Located within a larger backdrop of cultural apocalypse and disaster, Joyce's 'erudite gibberish indistinguishable to most people from the familiar word salad produced by hebephrenic patients on the back wards of any state hospital' (Cleckley 7) manifests the aesthetics of the oppressed desires through a dream-language invested with libidinal and instinctual energies that oppose any imposition of coercive form. Yet he borrows the underlying structure from the eighteenth-century philosopher Giambattista Vico to validate his play of free associations. Departing from the typified modernist *modus operandi* of using metonymic allusions, *Wake* explores the limits of ontological metaphors. It may be argued that Joyce's final work betrays the limits of knowledge and cognition. While foregrounding the fragmented and discontinuous subjectivity, Joyce opens up a scope for free-play of signification, seemingly providing a critique of the distinction between the signifier and the signified being a dualistic relic of European metaphysics. Language becomes the narrative itself as Samuel Beckett rightly asserts that the *Finnegans Wake* is 'not about something, but that something itself.' (Beckett 14) I would not claim that I would 'read' Joyce to explore the semiotic processes at play to reach a greater understanding of 'language' and its functions. One might notice how Joyce not only imbibed the avant-gardism in the act of writing but stretched it to its subversive extreme, almost offering a litmus test for a gamut of critical approaches and literary theories that were yet to take shape. It reacted against and problematized the traditional aesthetics; it was intended to offend rather than to please the readers. Placed between the two World Wars, the reception of Joyce's works, compounded by the difficulty in circulation, was barely welcoming.

My hypothesis is that the nonsense in *Finnegans Wake* functions within the English linguistic code either through adherence or deviance, meaningful engagements or violations. Joyce's sense of his own marginality and isolation finds a voice through his solipsistic withdrawal into the confines of language games, creating a literary hoax upon the act of writing itself. The fissiparous nature of language generates heterogeneity and multiplicity of meanings imparted to the prismatic nature of human experience. Transcending the national boundaries and the limits of modernist experimentation, Joyce spends a larger part of his life writing something that, despite being notoriously difficult to make sense of, expresses his resistance against the homogenizing regime of Irish nationalism, morals propounded by Catholicism, and the colonial imaginations of the British Empire. My dissertation would argue that there is a subterranean linguistic violence that invests the nonsensicality generated by both the form and the content with subversive qualities and it is precisely the textual politics and the extra-textual sociological significance of this nonsensicality that this study will seek to explore.

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